

**Testimony Before the Senate Education Committee**

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**Tuesday, March 7, 2017**

Chairman Pavlov, members of the committee, good afternoon. My name is Michael Rice, and I am the superintendent of the Kalamazoo Public Schools. KPS has more than 13,000 pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. In the last 11 years, since the advent of the Kalamazoo Promise, we have grown by 2,455 students, approximately 24 percent. During a period when most urban districts and many non-urban districts have declined in enrollment, KPS has grown from the 24<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> largest district in the state.

In the last decade, we have improved in many ways, with the addition of full-day pre-kindergarten at our highest-poverty elementary schools, full-day kindergarten, middle school honors courses, middle school strategic reading and math courses, Advanced Placement courses, theme schools, and a number of other initiatives.

Since 2007, every major indicator in the district has improved, including but not limited to reading, writing, and math achievement; Advanced Placement (AP) participation and success; high school graduation rates; and postsecondary enrollment and completion rates. The number of students taking AP courses has more than doubled, and the number of AP courses taken by our students has almost tripled. In 2010, we won the Race to the Top Commencement Challenge for our emerging college-going culture and hosted the president at the Kalamazoo Central High School graduation. Just a few weeks ago, Bridge Magazine published a study that divided high schools into socioeconomic categories by free and reduced-price lunch eligibility. Of the 141 high schools in the state with free and reduced-price lunch eligibility of 55 percent or above, Loy Norrix and Kalamazoo Central, our two comprehensive high schools, ranked first and fourth, respectively, in an index that used college readiness, post-high school enrollment, and post-high school progress as indicators.

And yet, we are poorer now than we were a decade ago, with concentrations of poverty that rival those of the poorest communities in the state. Seven of our elementary schools have been at a minimum 90 percent free or reduced-price lunch eligible at least once in the last three years, with three of these schools 90 percent or more free or reduced-price lunch eligible for at least ten years in a row. Among these seven elementary schools are two schools that are on the list of potential school closures by the state: Washington Writers' Academy and Woodward School for Technology and Research.

Washington has averaged 95 percent free or reduced-price lunch eligible for the last ten years. Woodward has averaged 89 percent in the last eight.

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate your leadership and your invitation today to discuss the replacement of 1280c and, more importantly, ways to improve education in high-poverty schools. In these areas, the following themes need to be taken into account:

1. Poverty Matters. Children who have few or no supports or exposure at home need far more from school than middle-class children do. Economically disadvantaged children come to school with an opportunity deficit when compared to non-economically disadvantaged children. Schools that educate large percentages of poor children are particularly challenged and challenging. While the number of children living in poverty in Michigan has increased over the last decade, we have failed to take greater poverty into account as we attempt to support children and educators in Michigan schools.
2. Teaching Staff Quantity, Quality, and Stability Matter. In its work with university teacher education programs, it is the state's responsibility to ensure sufficient new teacher quantity and quality. The state's teacher education programs produce too many elementary education teacher candidates, and far too few teacher candidates in math, science, special education, bilingual education, English as a Second Language (ESL), and vocational and technical education. There is a tremendous lack of physical therapists, occupational therapists, and school psychologists.

In addition to teacher quantity and quality, teacher stability within a school is important, particularly in a school that educates a large percentage of poor children who often have substantial instability in their lives. While some may disagree, when the state made teacher placement a prohibited subject of bargaining in 2011, it created a significant opportunity for greater staff stability and by extension cohesion in high-poverty schools.

3. Strong Principal/Building Leadership and Principal Stability Matter. Rome wasn't built in a day, and strong principal/building leadership isn't either. It takes time to build a strong leadership team, and the improvement of a high-poverty school requires strong leadership.

Law, regulation, and policy--federal or state--that require changes in building leadership without knowledge of the specifics of a given school or school district reform effort work outside of school research....and common sense.

Just as many school districts—rural, suburban, and urban—are struggling with inadequate numbers of certain types of teachers, urban districts are having more difficulty hiring strong urban principals. Some—like our district—have begun aspiring administrator academies, which have been helpful. Also helpful would be the state

incentivizing university education programs to create or strengthen urban administrator programs.

4. Classroom Management, Relationship Building, and Cultural Competence Matter.

University teacher education programs are heavy on courses of content and instructional methods associated with particular subjects, and light or devoid of courses on classroom management, relationship building, and cultural competence. The latter courses are especially important for prospective teachers who have little or no experience in urban public education.

In our district, more than 400 staff members mentor approximately 2,000 students in weekly 5-to-1 mentoring sessions. Begun last year as a challenge by me to our staff, these meetings are very important for our children but are also beneficial for me and our staff members, many of whom are learning about their students in a different way with the mentoring experience.

Additionally, in the last two years, we have begun culturally responsive education professional development, to help our teachers—many raised in suburban and rural communities—better understand our urban students.

While both of these programs have been useful, it would be additionally helpful if the state would mandate or incentivize some of the same sorts of work within teacher education programs before teacher education students become teachers.

5. School Culture Matters. It's not just the classroom environment that has an impact on student achievement. It's also the school culture.

We have explored, and a number of our schools have received, professional development in various school culture models. These include Capturing Kids' Hearts and Rachel's Challenge. Senator Colbeck, your discussion of Five Star Life is consistent with this important theme. I agree with you.

6. Accountability and Complexity in Accountability Matter. It was the famous journalist, H.L. Mencken, who once wrote, "There is always an easy solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong."

Those who advocate for a single letter grade to define a school—tempting as it may be—are wrong. To distill a school to a test score, or a letter grade, is reductive to the point of folly. If individuals shouldn't be defined in such narrow ways—and they shouldn't—a school many times more complex surely shouldn't be either.

As one very important set of customers, our parents judge schools on a wide range of factors. For some, state test results are important. For others, they are not. The factors that our parents use to judge schools—safety and security, strength of staff, caring of staff, range of curriculum, student achievement, transportation, and many others—cannot be summed up in a single or a common metric. Make all relevant data easily available to parents, but don't attempt to distill enormous complexity into specious simplicity. It says more about the creators of the system than it does about the schools.

Senator Knollenberg, if I recall correctly, you recently expressed reservations about an A-F system of accountability. I agree with you. Make data widely available and let parents decide what data they want to use to select schools for their children.

7. Parents and Parent Choice Matter. A lot. You can't have it both ways. You can't say that parents and parent choice matter, and also say that parents need to be protected from their own choices. Thousands of parents across the state disagree with a state agency indicating that their children's schools are inadequate and should be shuttered and thereby substituting agency judgment for parent judgment about what's best for the parents' children.

Parent choice isn't a panacea and it isn't without its challenges in a whole host of ways, but you can't both profess to value parent choice in the abstract and denigrate the concrete choices made by parents.

KPS is a strong choice district. Half of our 26 schools are magnet schools of one sort or another, including Washington and Woodward, chosen by the parents of 776 students. Additionally, parents can apply to have their children attend any of our district schools. We appreciate and value a parent's right to select the school that works best for his or her child.

8. Student Time and Time on Task Matter. There is a whole body of literature on time and time on task. They matter a lot.

When the legislature increased the minimum number of days in a school year, it aided school children in many districts in the state that had fewer than the current minimum 180 days. The legislature should strongly consider a repeal of the stricture associated with starting before Labor Day. Infrequent waivers aren't sufficient.

9. Student Mental Health Matters. I mentioned teacher shortages and included psychologists in my shortage-area list a few minutes ago. There is a profound lack of student mental health support in our schools. We would benefit from the state

legislature working on this critical issue, not simply with respect to funding, although that would be of significant assistance, but in terms of working to grow the number of school psychologists or therapists in the state. You don't have to be a licensed mental health practitioner to see the mental health needs in our schools.

10. Research and Best Practices Matter. A lot of us believe that, because we went to school, we know a lot about school. I've ridden on a lot of planes, but I can't fly them. I've watched a lot of football games, but I don't think I should be quarterbacking any NFL teams.

With respect to what works—and what doesn't—in schools, we should be guided by research and best practice. While the literature isn't perfect, it's a lot better than flying blind or operating solely based on one's gut.

11. Community Partners Matter. Schools are the one place in a community where virtually all children convene. It is for this reason, and perhaps no other, that schools are increasingly expected to address more and more areas of responsibility in the upbringing of children.

Unfortunately, however, Michigan children are in school 1,098 hours annually at a minimum and typically fewer than 1,200 hours a year. There are 8,760 hours in a year. In other words, schools have children less than 14 percent of the year, and yet bear the onus, increasingly, of responsibilities that have historically fallen on parents and families to address.

If we are to be successful with this widened swath of responsibility, we are going to have to partner widely. We have more than 200 community partners in Kalamazoo. We are working hard with them to make sure that their work and ours coordinate closely on behalf of children and families.

12. Local Control Matters. Our state doesn't have a good track record of improving the student achievement of high-poverty, low-performing schools. In fairness, it is unrealistic to expect much of anything from partners that aren't deeply involved in the schools and communities that they serve. That's not about the state of Michigan. Frankly, that makes sense anywhere you try to serve children and families. You have to actually interact with people in education.

To support and empower local schools and districts makes sense. To attempt to do more is hard to fathom, without enormous staff and enormous commitment.

13. ISDs/RESAs Matter. We spend a lot of money on ISDs/RESAs in the state. If we're not going to use them maximally, let's pare them back. Alternatively, we can make them, to a greater degree, the state's vehicle for assisting those schools and school districts that educate the highest concentrations of poverty in the state in some of the most challenging communities.
14. Money Matters. You didn't think I'd come before the committee and not mention money. It matters. A lot as well.

That it's *not all about money* is different than it's *not at all about money*. It is, in fact, in part about money. Some things have a cost, and there's just no getting around it.

That said, simply increasing school funding, in the absence of a focus on research or best practices, is a mistake. Some expenditures are far more likely to drive higher student achievement than others.

An example: More revenue permits a district to lower class size at the high school level from 30 to 28 students per class. This decrease may be desirable from a variety of perspectives, but it won't necessarily improve student achievement. According to the literature, reducing class size and teaching in the same way typically generates the same student achievement. On the other hand, if one reduces an elementary class size from 25 to 20 students and uses the reduction to individualize writing instruction to a greater extent, it is far more likely that the change will generate an increase in student achievement than the first class size example.

We've already had one state school funding study that has indicated that we underfund education in Michigan. Most particularly, we underfund the education of poor children and English language learners in the state. Apart from the \$1,000 per student underfunding of the foundation allowance, the study noted an underfunding of poor children of 30 percent beyond base funding and of English language learners of 40 percent beyond base funding. More to the point, states that are having greater success in the education of poor children and English language learners are investing more into their education and getting more in return on their investment.

In recognition of this important theme, the governor's budget includes a \$150 million increase in at risk funding. I appreciate the governor's leadership in this area and urge the legislature's support of this increase.

Chairman Pavlov and members of the committee, I appreciate the committee's forbearance in permitting me the opportunity to share thoughts on ways to improve 1280c and, more importantly, ways to improve student achievement in high poverty schools in the state.